

Ruthless Critique or Selective Apologia? The Postcolonial Left in Theory and Practice

BLAIR TAYLOR

ABSTRACT

The Left, both in the United States and globally, is sharply divided on questions regarding the universality or particularity of liberatory politics, the validity of critiques of religion, and the role of international solidarity. Concerns about false universality and the cynical manipulation of solidarity have translated into a generalized suspicion of these once basic left concepts. Increasingly, one set of ostensibly left commitments—anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and anti-militarism—are deployed against the values of universalism, free speech, and solidarity. Is this simply a matter of strategic differences, or does it reflect more fundamental theoretical and political disagreements that are reshaping the basic contours of left politics? This article explores this question through a Marxian analysis of left reactions to the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, the subsequent PEN award boycott, and the decolonial politics of *Le Parti des indigènes de la République* in the United States. It argues that this transformation in political culture mirrors a transformation within academia that was pioneered in the United States but is now transatlantic: the ascendance of a new constellation of critical intellectual traditions—postcolonialism, poststructuralism, Critical Whiteness Studies, and queer theory—that are highly critical of the Enlightenment, universalism, and secularism. It offers a political and theoretical critique of the assumptions undergirding contemporary postcolonial left argumentation, illustrating how they resonate with philosophical positions pioneered by the right.

The murder of satirical journalists at *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris by Islamist gunmen became a hotly contested event within contemporary left politics. On one side, liberals, atheists, and a smattering of “classical” leftists harshly denounced the attacks and political Islam, defending free speech and declaring their solidarity: “*Je suis Charlie*.” On the other, the postcolonial and anti-imperialist Left used the occasion to denounce not the attack but the magazine itself on the grounds that it is a racist and Islamophobic publication, ignoring its antiracist and left wing origins. Rejecting support for free speech and the murdered journalists as complicity with Islamophobia and the status quo, they instead shifted attention on domestic racism and western imperialism as the real culprits. Subsequent attacks in Paris and elsewhere have elicited similar arguments, now following a fairly predictable pattern.

These instances are symptomatic of a deeper division within the contemporary Left, which is sharply divided on questions regarding the universality or particularity of liberatory politics, the validity of critiques of religion, and the role of international solidarity. Concerns about false universality and the cynical manipulation of solidarity have translated into a generalized suspicion of these once basic left concepts. Increasingly, one set of ostensibly left commitments—anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and anti-militarism—are deployed against the values of univer-

salism, free speech, and solidarity. Is this simply a matter of strategic differences, or does it reflect more fundamental political disagreements that are reshaping the basic contours of left politics?

This article will suggest the latter: namely, that a political constellation that draws primarily on the traditions of postcolonialism, poststructuralism, white privilege/Critical Whiteness theory, and queer theory has carved out a new and distinct tradition in left wing politics, especially in the United States (Jacoby, Gitlin, Reed). These perspectives are united by a profound distrust or complete rejection of core principles of universalism, secularism, liberalism, and in some cases Marxism, which are understood as irredeemably false universals that mask racist, imperialist assumptions and reinforce existing power dynamics. As the whole is always both partial and reflective of oppressive power relations, these discourses have translated into a new conventional wisdom that insists one can only ever speak on behalf of oneself or one's identity group. In other words, one can only ever speak in the name of the particular. Although this political gesture is now closely associated with identity politics and critiques of economic reductionist class politics, it is in fact largely derived from a Marxist standpoint theory. In the late 60s, the presumed revolutionary potential of the proletariat's subject position was given feminist, antiracist, and gay interpretations by New Left socialists in the Combahee River Collective statement (1977) and the Gay Liberation Front manifesto (1971). Yet today, the very term "we" that has historically been the foundation of left politics is viewed by many leftists with suspicion if not contempt.

L'Affaire Charlie Hebdo

This new perspective came sharply into focus during the recent *Charlie Hebdo* affair, which prompted an immediate and seemingly unbridgeable divide within the Left. Notably, large segments of the left refused solidarity with the twelve left-wing journalists murdered by right-wing extremists. As the gunmen were Islamists, most left treatments leapfrogged over the actual murder to the possible (however likely) anti-Muslim backlash. Richard Seymour's article "On Charlie Hebdo" in *Jacobin* was typical, skipping "platitudinous points" about free speech to focus on the real threat: Islamophobia. Seymour begins by redefining "terrorism"—a suspicious word needing scare quotes—as not the calculated murder of civilians for political effect, but rather a "narrative device." He suggests public declarations of solidarity and free speech rallies were nothing more than a plot by the powerful to "defend a fetishized, racialized 'secularism'" that amounted to a form of "black-mail which forces us into solidarity with a racist institution" (Seymour).

Three months later, 7 prominent writers—including Junot Diaz, Eve Ensler, Rachael Kushner, and Michael Ondaatje—announced in a letter a boycott of the annual PEN free speech ceremony for the organization's decision to award a Freedom of Expression Courage Award to *Charlie Hebdo*. The number of PEN members who signed quickly exploded to 242, generating support from left media outlets like Glenn Greenwald's *The Intercept* (see Greenwald) and triggering an intense public dispute between Francine Prose and Salman Rushdie. In their

letter to PEN describing the reasons behind the boycott, the writers justified the boycott by arguing that in honoring *Hebdo* the organization was “not simply conveying support for freedom of expression, but also valorizing selectively offensive material: material that intensifies the anti-Islamic, anti-Maghreb, anti-Arab sentiments already prevalent in the Western world” (Cole et al.). The letter continues that for a “population that is already marginalized, embattled, and victimized, a population that is shaped by the legacy of France’s various colonial enterprises, and that contains a large percentage of devout Muslims,” *Hebdo*’s cartoons “must be seen as being intended to cause further humiliation and suffering” (Cole et al.).

The prevention of “humiliation” caused by “offensive material” is an unusual criterion for members of an organization devoted to “defending freedom of expression” to uphold. Its justification rests on a vigilance toward existing power imbalances wherein free speech is contingent on one’s relationship to power rather than an absolute right, captured in their statement that “in an unequal society, equal opportunity offense does not have an equal effect” (ibid). The result is a relativization of free speech. Thus by boycotting an event to honor slain journalists held by an organization founded to support writers imprisoned and killed for their views, these ostensibly liberal writers performed a strange reversal of perpetrator and victim that reproduced the same arguments of the right wing extremists who carried out the attacks: *Hebdo* constituted an intolerable affront to the Muslim world. Indeed, this position echoed the official responses of the Catholic Church and conservative Islamic groups: by offending religious sensibilities, *Charlie Hebdo* essentially “asked for it.” Yet this position reproduces rather than undermines a Eurocentric perspective; it ignores the fact that in the Middle East and North Africa, Islamist governments and movements are the powerful actors persecuting and killing blasphemers. As *Hebdo* and other instances have shown, the power of this movement has a global reach, with targets ranging from atheist bloggers in Bangladesh to directors in Amsterdam.

The crux of the argument against *Hebdo* rested on its alleged racism. In *Jacobin*, a leading magazine of the American Left, Richard Seymour made his case via condescending appeals to the authority of a different sacred text, the lodestar of postcolonial theory: “if you need to be convinced of this [racism], then I suggest you do your research, beginning with reading Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, as well as some basic introductory texts on Islamophobia, and then come back to the conversation.” However, *Hebdo*’s racism was typically assumed rather than demonstrated, usually by referring to a handful of cartoons offered devoid of political context or comprehension of the French language. The familiar charge that *Hebdo* was disproportionately “obsessed” with Islam was refuted by an empirical study in *Le Monde Diplomatique* that analyzed 538 *Charlie Hebdo* cover images and found only 1.3 percent focused on Islam out of 7.2 percent targeting religion at all (Mignot and Gofette).

While left attention focused exclusively on the alleged Islamophobia and *symbolic* “violence” of cartoons, these same writers had little to say about the decidedly *non-symbolic* violence that claimed 12 lives. They ignored completely the explicitly racist dimension of the attack, namely the targeted attack on a Jewish supermarket that was carried out by a close friend of the *Hebdo* attackers and killed four during

the subsequent police manhunt. Only a curious and partial anti-racism can ignore the recurring pattern of overtly antisemitic violence that often characterizes Islamist terrorism. Days after the November 15, 2015, Bataclan attacks in Paris three Islamic State sympathizers stabbed a visibly Jewish school teacher in Marseilles; one of the attackers who was caught had a photo of Mohamed Merah, the gunman who killed four at a Jewish school in Toulouse in 2012. These acts of racist terror in the real world are largely ignored by left media; antisemitism is rarely mentioned in left anti-racist discourse anywhere in the world outside of Germany (Arnold 395-96).

These positions do not result from a misunderstanding of *Charlie Hebdo's* irreverent anarchic politics or French political culture, but rather reflect the explicit political commitments of a postcolonial Left that discards Enlightenment values of universalism, secularism, and free speech as mere masks for racism and imperialism. When considered alongside the total silence or explicit rationalization regarding one form of racism, antisemitism, it becomes difficult to see this political constellation and the strange bedfellows it results in as merely accidental, or for that matter, left in any meaningful sense.

Decolonial Politics versus the Left: Le Parti des indigenes de la République

The problems posed by a reductive postcolonial perspective become especially clear in the case of the French political organization Le Parti des indigènes de la République (Party of the Indigenous of the Republic, PIR), which first became known outside France for their controversial statements in the wake of the *Hebdo* attacks that claimed that solidarity with the victims merely “served to unite white power” (Bouteldja and Tahar-Chaouch). PIR was founded in 2005 as a response to the racism and immigrant rage that had exploded in the Parisian *banlieues*. They describe their politics as neither left nor right, but “decolonial.” In fact, they state that their “primary adversary” is the French Left, whose “Eurocentric emphasis on the issues of class and employment” is presented as the primary obstacle to PIR’s priorities of “racism, police violence, Islamophobia and Zionism” (Bouteldja). PIR claims these politics are grounded in the “real and authentic experiences” of postcolonial subjects, and explicitly “counteracts and opposes [...] the Enlightenment, Marxism, Western Rationalism, Universalism and Republicanism,” understood as contributing to a “linear historicity aiding the concept of white supremacy” (Bouteldja). The resulting politics is a familiar one for those who claim to be “neither left nor right”:

[PIR] is a middle finger, a big “fuck you” to the Left. Or if you prefer, a *quenelle*. This pendulum swing to the right, contrary to appearances, is one of liberation. [...]. We should be considered allies [...]. For this to be possible, we must be accepted as we are: a group that is racially and socially dominated, not necessarily clear-cut on several issues: not clear-cut on capitalism, not clear-cut on class struggle, not clear-cut on women, not clear-cut on homosexuality, not clear-cut on Jews. (Bouteldja)

While the French Left has been sharply divided on PIR, the group has been celebrated by some as representing a more radical antiracist perspective than traditional “integrationist” organizations like SOS Racisme. Yet this same speech, titled “Dieudonné through the prism of the white left,” not only refuses to de-

nounce the comedian's antisemitism but embraces it. Despite PIR's assurance that "the project uniting us must be a project of radical justice for all," the same line continues with the ominous qualification, "For this, one must necessarily accept to get one's hands dirty." PIR attempts to legitimize their antisemitism with a highly selective quote from the Trinidadian Marxist C. L. R. James:

The movements which seek 'to drive the Jew out of Harlem or the South Side' have a valid class base. They are the reactions of the resentful Negro seeking economic relief and some salve for his humiliated racial pride. That these sentiments can be exploited by fanatical idiots, Negro anti-Semites, or self-seeking Negro businessmen, does not alter their fundamentally progressive basis. (Bouteldja)

Yet these lines, taken out of context from James's *On the Negro Question* (1996), are in fact part of a Marxist critique of both black nationalism and antisemitism as barriers to working-class unity. Only a few pages earlier James argues, "fascists and proto-fascist elements in their efforts to batter down organized labor, will not fail to use the growing racial tension in the country as the Nazis used antisemitism in Germany" (77). One might still criticize James for the simplistic Trotskyist dichotomy between "bad" black nationalist leaders peddling antisemitism and "good" black proletarians evinced by his injunction to "differentiate between Negro nationalist leaders and their sincere but misguided followers" (82-83), but the overall argument is a strident denunciation of exactly the kind of racialized nationalism advocated by PIR:

The party must wage a merciless war against the Negro nationalist movements (...) It demonstrates their fantastic and reactionary proposals for Negro emancipation. It explains in detail the utter impossibility of their realization, and furthermore, takes the trouble to explain that even if these were realized, it would not in any way benefit the great masses of the Negro people. (82)

PIR's antisemitism exists alongside overt homophobia. Party leader Houria Bouteldja has stated, "The homosexual way of life does not exist in the *banlieues*, and that's not entirely a bad thing," while queer members have been asked to leave the organization (qtd. Wolfe). Given this explicit homophobia, antisemitism, cultural chauvinism, ambiguity towards capitalism, and animosity towards the Left, their chilly reception by sectors of the French Left is unsurprising. What is more surprising is that such ideas have found any welcome on the Left at all. Perhaps paradoxically, "decolonial" politics have found their warmest reception in North America within the very groups demonized by this discourse: queers, (antizionist) Jews, and white leftists. PIR's claim that it is not "clear-cut" on traditional left commitments is ultimately unconvincing, and taken as a whole their politics are all too clear. They belong to the historical and theoretical project of the right.

Reverse Orientalism, Inverted Eurocentrism

While PIR's specific positions are not common on the Left, they emanate from a set of widely-shared assumptions within postcolonial left discourse which, despite their radical rhetoric, result in a crude and reductive analysis of social power

relations. This tendency becomes especially clear when considering much left discourse on political Islam, which, as shown by the *Hebdo* examples and PIR's statements, is generally understood as a regrettably confused but ultimately understandable form of resistance by the powerless to western Islamophobia, war, and imperialism. First, this perception is as inaccurate as it is dangerously naïve; it overlooks Islamism's sponsorship by powerful states like Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as its broad appeal to the affluent and westerners. There is no direct causality linking social exclusion or poverty to political radicalization, either of the left or the right. While such immiseration theories of social change have been largely discredited regarding Marxism and the working class, they live on in post-colonial discourse. Second, this perspective is both mechanistic and Eurocentric: it posits that one prime agent, the West, acts, while everyone else merely reacts. As David Bell notes, "it is in fact deeply condescending to assume that Muslims do nothing but react to the crimes and mistakes of the West." This view denies Islamists political and moral agency, while also conveniently disregarding their stated motivations and political aims (cf. Postone). The irony is that these aims hew closely to the very imperialist vision of a brutal global empire that the post-colonial left denounces, only in this case taking the form of a theocratic caliphate.

As a result, these arguments easily slip from historical contextualization into rationalization. Ward Churchill's post-9/11 essay "*Some People Push Back*": *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens* (2001), which argued al Qaeda had "given Americans a tiny dose of their own medicine [...]" and, unquestionably, America has earned it" is perhaps paradigmatic, although not unique. Queer feminist theorist Judith Butler's statement that "[u]nderstanding Hamas/Hezbollah as social movements that are progressive [...] that are part of a global left, is extremely important" must also be included ("Judith Butler Whitewashes"). Meredith Tax has collected many other instances of left apologia for right-wing Islamist movements in her book *Double Bind: The Muslim Right, the Anglo-American Left, and Universal Human Rights*. To contextualize such professions of understanding or even sympathy for right-wing movements by self-described leftists, one might try to imagine its domestic corollary: "Violence by the KKK is of course deplorable, but must be seen as the direct result of decades of outsourced jobs, poor education from defunded schools, and the erosion of the welfare state by neoliberalism." The arguments are structurally indistinguishable, viewing political violence as a rational if confused response to real political problems, thus requiring not condemnation but deeper introspection and self-analysis on the part of the victim.

Indeed, having abandoned universalism to embrace ontological difference, postcolonialism frequently aligns with reactionary traditionalist, nationalist, and religious ideas. Unsurprisingly, conservatives in Poland, Indonesia, and Nigeria have begun to justify their right-wing views in the language of postcolonialism, branding feminism, gay rights, tolerance, and secularism as "western" or "imperial" impositions that are inauthentic and oppressive to the "local" culture (Bill, Žižek). In Europe today a wide variety of right-wing populist groups speak a postcolonial-tinged language of defending various local lifeways and "homelands" against the foreign invaders of Muslims and refugees. In a similar vein, during WWII, Germany marketed Nazism in the Arab and African world as an

“anti-imperialist” ideological alternative to the French and British colonizers (cf. Goldenbaum).

Thus it is politically unclear what “decolonization” means in practice, an ambiguity that allows for right as well as left-wing interpretations. Some seem to take it literally, as a project of uprooting any contamination by “the West” and sending “settler-colonialists” and their descendants back where they came from (Tuck and Yang). Such arguments are not only deeply ahistorical—mobility and migration have been constants of human history—but once again reveal a profoundly Eurocentric gaze. Europeans have no monopoly on imperial domination; indeed they arrived relatively late to that game, following in the bloody footsteps of the Mongol, Persian, Umayyad, and Ottoman empires. Indigenous societies were not peaceful utopias but had their own oppressive hierarchies and power relations; slavery was a common institution among Pacific Northwest tribes (Hunt), while the powerful Iroquois dominated other regional tribes in imperial fashion (Brandão, Muir). Thus long before European colonization, indigenous groups, lands, and tribal borders were not timeless and static entities but human societies that changed over time, sometimes dramatically and violently. This historical blind spot renders postcolonialism oblivious to the imperial ambitions, past and present, of non-western nations like Turkey, China, Russia, Iran, and Japan. The contemporary Left’s deafening silence on Syria is telling; as the United States and Israel have been eclipsed by sectarian struggles for regional dominance between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran, it no longer instinctively knows who to blame and what side to take, and thus says nothing at all.

Rather than challenging the underlying logics of racism and colonialism the postcolonial Left simply inverts them, portraying monolithic “indigenous” and “colonized” groups as noble savages arrayed against equally homogenous “white” or “western” populations. The result is a reverse Orientalism wherein essentialist categories are retained but with traditional moral polarities upended. Postcolonial subjects, Muslims, and people of color are recoded as inherently good and progressive, while the West is always bad, or at least worse, regardless of case, context, or political actors. Yet this simplistic moral inversion of the classic cowboys versus Indians narrative of how the west was won is ultimately as narcissistic as views it seeks to replace; it views the world solely in relation to the crimes of the imperial metropole. For this reason Vivek Chibber concludes, “It should be obvious that, in the name of displacing Eurocentrism, postcolonial theory ends up resurrecting it with a ferocious intensity” (291).

When Left Becomes Right

In a historical irony, the Left and right have switched positions on a variety of key issues: the importance of cultural difference, universalism, relativism, secularism, free speech, human rights, and in some cases even the need for radical social change. Today, it is left defenders of *différance* who relentlessly attack any notion of a shared human experience, updating Joseph de Maistre’s anti-universalist rebuke of the French Revolution: “Now, there is no such thing in the world

as Man. In the course of my life, I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc.; I am even aware, thanks to Montesquieu, that one can be a Persian. But, as for Man, I declare that I have never met him in my life. If he exists, I certainly have no knowledge of him" (xxiii). On this view, it is no mere accident that postcolonialism has significant overlap with conservative politics. Such overlap reflects shared philosophical assumptions. This helps clarify the otherwise seemingly strange political bedfellows of Islamists and Marxist-Leninists, theocrats with queer feminists, antisemites and anti-racists, anarchists and reactionary nationalists.

Michel Foucault represents an important pioneer of this political constellation. His critiques of the Enlightenment and modernity translated into his enthusiastic early support for the Khomeini revolution in Iran, thus fusing two streams of thought that have become ubiquitous within (post)modern critical academic discourse: poststructuralism and postcolonialism (Afary and Anderson). Considered alongside the earlier affinities of Nietzschean-Heideggerian philosophy with Nazism, Foucault and Butler's more recent overtures to Islamic fundamentalist movements illustrate a recurrent political pattern of theoretical sympathy for reactionary antimodernist movements. Bruce Robbins (2016) and Ross Wolfe ("Dialectics and Difference," 2017) have pointed out similar theoretical problems faced by two recent attempts to "decolonize Critical Theory," Amy Allen's *The End of Progress* (2016) and George Ciccariello-Maher's *Decolonizing Dialectics* (2017).

Thus as with anti-imperialism before it, postcolonialism opens space for endorsing reactionary movements as proxy vehicles for leftists sidelined by history to project their desires and resentments onto, disregarding apparent political contradictions. This is "radicalism" at its worst: other-directed, backward-looking, valorizing violence, and decidedly non-utopian. Another danger of this powerlessness-induced left realpolitik is that it works both ways, creating an equal and opposite impulse by some to uncritically defend liberalism, interventionism, and the progressive aspects of capitalism (cf. Schlembach). Thus the unlikely alliance mentioned above is also mirrored on the other side: labor leftists, internationalist feminists, and Marxist intellectuals are finding themselves agreeing with liberals, civil libertarians, and right-wing critics of the postcolonial left's flirtations with Islamism. While this process of realignment has been long underway within the German Left (Schlembach), this process is now provoking similar conversations within the Anglo-American Left. But unlike the anti-German rift, this emergent schism focuses on how the culture of the Left has changed in relation to issues like intolerance of free speech, desires for "safe spaces," an increasingly fractious politics hostile to any "we," and a general sense that the enforcement of "politically correct" speech and behavior has become authoritarian and essentialist, especially on college campuses.

Why would large parts of the contemporary academic and activist left embrace a politics that combines particularism with a barely-concealed skepticism about the possibility of social change, positions once the exclusive domain of the right? Moishe Postone argues that this development reflects the impotence of the Left in an era where hopes for emancipatory social change have dimmed. For Postone, it is a response to the frustratingly slow pace of social change, the intransigence of racism, and the relative absence of progressive mass movements (96-99). Postcolonial thought, as well as the aptly-named Afropessimist theory currently in

vogue, is one of the clearest expressions of this trend. From the colonial plantation to neo-colonialism, slavery to “the New Jim Crow,” these theories ahistorically suggest that the more things change, the more they stay the same (cf. Maldonado-Torres; Wilderson). Thus the current metric of intellectual radicalism becomes not how to illuminate racial or colonial domination with the aim of transcending it, but rather to insist on its permanence (cf. Stephens). This updated version of the radical gesture of “the better the worse” makes for heady theoretical posturing, but poor history. It results in a fundamentally conservative, defensive orientation that idealizes static endogenous populations and reduces politics to resisting “outsiders.” Indeed, the discourse of right-wing populism in Europe today shares a common vocabulary with postcolonialism, decrying the assault on “indigenous” culture by “foreign invaders” in the form of Muslims and refugees, enforced undemocratically by a neo-colonial European Union.

This divide between a politics based on particularity and a shared culture set against universalism and shared positions is becoming an increasingly central fault line in contemporary political life, one that is profoundly reconfiguring the Left. To some, the rise of the alt-right and the resurgent fascist movement emboldened by the Trump presidency has confirmed the centrality of race politics. Yet the danger is that a handful of Nazis and white supremacists—a tiny fraction of the population readily denounced by almost everyone aside from the current President—will return theoretical attention to the familiar terrain of race politics in which postcolonialism specializes. Precisely at a moment when the hegemony of reductive identity politics has finally been challenged from within the Left by Marxists of color like Adolph Reed, Cedric Robinson, and Asad Haider, events like the Charlottesville rally may reinvigorate pre-existing tendencies to exaggerate both the appeal and historical continuity of white supremacy, while overlooking important structural and ideological changes in the racial order. In reality, postcolonial theory does not challenge the partisans of postmodern racial tribalism. Rather, it speaks the same political language (cf. Fluss and Frim). As Angela Nagel has noted, the alt-right is based on a white identity politics that simply reclaims a philosophical heritage the Left temporarily borrowed from the right. This basic symmetry was recently illustrated when the aforementioned Ciccariello-Maher was embroiled in controversy for tweeting, “All I want for Christmas is white genocide,” and following up with, “To clarify, when the whites were massacred during the Haitian revolution, that was a good thing indeed” (qtd. Papenfus). Although the first tweet satirized the racist right’s mythical fear of “white genocide,” the latter comment corresponds to postcolonialism’s frequent invocations of Fanon to valorize subaltern violence coupled to its basic reorientation of left radicalism from class war to race war.

The legacies of colonialism and racism are all too real, as is the Islamophobia fueling a resurgence of right-wing xenophobic movements. Yet while combating these forces several pitfalls must be avoided: silently ignoring or dismissing the real threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism, adopting postcolonial positions that reproduce essentialist and monolithic notions of “culture,” as well as the rationalization of indigenous forms of domination and capitalist exploitation obscured by a simplistic “inside/outside” political dichotomy. It is necessary to address the ongoing reality of inequalities based on fictional and restrictive categories of

race and nation, but without reinforcing and reproducing these same irrational social divisions. “West,” “non-west,” “white people,” and “people of color” are not stable or unified categories but relationships of power that can and must be challenged rather than affirmed. It must also be stressed that these groups are not monolithic, but internally divided by class, gender, and most importantly, political commitments that do not directly correspond to subject position. By fusing subjectivity, culture, and politics to one’s social location, the postcolonial Left resurrects the same closed worldview the Enlightenment sought to abolish. Its binary political schema of “the west vs. the rest” results in an affirmative rather than critical view of society, offering selective apologia in place of Marx’s bracing call for the “ruthless critique of everything existing” (13).

The cultural relativism that undergirds such arguments makes politics impossible, as it allows no place to judge different “cultures” understood as static, autonomous, unitary, and authentic. Not only does this evacuate politics, but it can easily backfire; just as claims about essential difference once buttressed slavery, the Confederate flag is defended today as a symbol of a unique Southern cultural heritage that must be protected. Absent a universal metric, which “culture” is worthy of support and defense? Politics, by its very nature, means judgment and taking positions, just as *radical* politics entails transformation of the status quo, not its defense. This extends to the ideas, lifeways, and institutions of elites and subalterns alike, whether in the form of states, markets, patriarchal masculinities, or religious obfuscation of the social world. Left reaction to *Charlie Hebdo* suggests that many leftists have forgotten that social change requires social conflict and offending received wisdom, not its polite affirmation. As Kenan Malik writes, “Today, when Enlightenment ideas are often seen as racist or reactionary because they are the products of European culture, and when the line between anti-imperialist and anti-Western sentiment has become all too blurred, [C.L.R. James’s] insistence [...] that the aim of anti-imperialism was not to reject Enlightenment ideas but to reclaim them for all of humanity has become all the more important.” The answer to the incomplete and partial legacy of universalism is not its wholesale rejection; a glance at the examples offered by history and the present reveals that rooting political claims in particularity, fixed cultural differences, and “tradition” is to embrace the political project of the right. Indeed, as the examples above show, there can be no left politics without the core Enlightenment principles of universalism, critique, and reasoned argument. As power relations around the world shift and the dominance of the U.S. and Europe continues to fade, the Left must be clear about its basic principles and not embrace reactionary ideologies simply on account of what they oppose or who espouses them.

Works Cited

- Afary, Janet, and Kevin B. Anderson. *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005. Print.
- Allen, Amy. *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Colombia UP, 2016. Print.

- Arnold, Sina. "From Occupation to Occupy: Antisemitism and the Contemporary Left in the United States." *Deciphering the New Antisemitism*. Bloomington: U of Indiana P: 2015. 375-404. Print.
- Bell, David A. "The French Dilemma." *Dissent*. Spring 2015. Web. 29 Jun. 2017. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/french-dilemma-charlie-hebdo-national-front>.
- Bill, Stanley. "Seeking the Authentic: Polish Culture and the Nature of Postcolonial Theory." *nonsite.org*. 12 Aug. 2014. Web. 5 Aug. 2017. <http://nonsite.org/article/seeking-the-authentic-polish-culture-and-the-nature-of-postcolonial-theory>.
- Bouteldja, Houria. "Decolonizing France." Trans. Ahmed Hassan. *Islamic Human Rights Commission*. 19 Oct. 2013. Web. 16 Oct. 2017. <http://www.leninology.co.uk/2014/03/dieudonne-through-prism-of-white-left.html>.
- . "Dieudonné through the Prism of the White Left, or Conceptualizing a Domestic Internationalism." *Lenin's Tomb*. 22 Feb. 2014. Web. 12 Feb. 2018. <http://indigenes-republique.fr/dieudonne-through-the-prism-of-the-white-left-or-conceptualizing-a-domestic-internationalism/>.
- Bouteldja, Houria, and Malik Tahar-Chaouch. "The Unity Trap." *Jacobin*. 4 Feb. 2015. Web. 17 Oct. 2017. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/02/charlie-hebdo-racism-movement/>.
- Brandão, José A. "Your Fyre Shall Burn No More: Iroquois Policy towards New France and Its Allies to 1701." Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997. 19-20. Print.
- Chibber, Vivek. *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*. London: Verso, 2013. Print.
- Churchill, Ward. *"Some People Push Back": On the Justice of Roosting Chickens*. Oakland: AK, 2001. Print.
- Ciccariello-Maher, George. *Decolonizing Dialectics*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2017. Print.
- Cole, Teju, et al. "Pen Award Gala Boycott Letter." *PEN America*. 5 May 2015. Web. 1 Nov. 2017. <https://pen.org/pen-receives-letter-from-members-about-charlie-hebdo-award/>.
- Combahee River Collective. "The Combahee River Collective Statement." 1977. *Circuitous*. Web. 3 Nov. 2017. <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>.
- de Maistre, Joseph. *Considerations on France*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP: 1994. Print.
- Fluss, Harrison, and Landon Frim. "Aliens, Antisemitism, and Academia." *Jacobin*. 11 Mar. 2017. Web. 1 Nov. 2017. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/jason-reza-jorjani-stony-brook-alt-right-arktos-continental-philosophy-modernity-enlightenment/>.
- Gay Liberation Front. "Manifesto." 1971. Fordham University. Web. 3 Nov. 2017. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/glf-london.asp>.
- Gitlin, Todd. *Twilight of Common Dreams*. New York: Holt, 1996. Print.
- Goldenbaum, Hans. "German Colonialism and Nazism as Anti-Imperialism." *Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Americanism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016. 639-52. Print.

- Greenwald, Glenn. "Writers Withdraw from Pen Gala to Protest Award to Charlie Hebdo." *The Intercept*. 27 Apr. 2015. Web. 30 Oct. 2017. <https://theintercept.com/2015/04/27/writers-withdraw-pen-gala-protest-award-charlie-hebdo/>.
- Hunt, H. F. "Slavery among the Indians of Northwest America." *The Washington Historical Quarterly* 9.4 (1918): 277-83. Print.
- Jacoby, Russell. *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in the Age of Apathy*. New York: Basic, 1999. Print.
- James, C. L. R. *On the Negro Question*. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1996. Print.
- "Judith Butler Whitewashes Hamas and Hezbollah." *Youtube*. 27 Oct. 2016. Web. 1 Nov. 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amJNlcSNPco>.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. "On the Coloniality of Being." *Cultural Studies* 21.2 (2007): 240-70. Print.
- Malik, Kenan. "C. L. R. James The Black Jacobins." *KenanMalik.com*. Reviews, 17 Aug. 2010. Web. 20 Jun. 2017. http://www.kenanmalik.com/reviews/james_jacobins.html.
- Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels, and Robert C. Tucker. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton, 1972. Print.
- Mignot, Jean-François, and Céline Goffette. "Non, Charlie Hebdo n'est pas obsédé par l'islam." *Le Monde Diplomatique*. 24 Feb. 2015. Web. 30 Oct. 2017. http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/02/24/non-charlie-hebdo-n-est-pas-obsede-par-l-islam_4582419_3232.html#2O578vUkvFLSoXUx.99.
- Muir, Diana. *Reflections in Bullough's Pond: Economy and Ecosystem in New England*. Lebanon, New Hampshire: U of New England P, 2000. Print.
- Nagel, Angela. *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2017. Print.
- Papenfus, Mary. "Drexel Professor Says 'White Genocide' Holiday Wish Was 'Satirical.'" *HuffingtonPost* 27 Dec. 2016. Web. 30 Oct. 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/george-ciccariello-maher-white-genocide_us_5861a56fe4b0de3a08f5f7d0.
- Postone, Moishe. "History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism." *Public Culture* 18.1 (2006): 93-110. Print.
- Reed, Adolph. *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene*. New York: New Press, 2001. Print.
- Robbins, Bruce. "Proving the Impossibility of Progress." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. 13 May 2016. Web. 5 Jun. 2017. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/proving-impossibility-progress/>.
- Schlembach, Raphael. "Towards a Critique of Anti-German 'Communism.'" *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements* 2.2 (2013): 199-219. Print.
- Seymour, Richard. "On Charlie Hebdo." *Jacobin*. 7 Jan. 2015. Web. 5 Jun. 2017. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/charlie-hebdo-islamophobia/>.
- Stephens, R. L. "The Birthmark of Damnation: Ta Nehisi-Coates and the Black Body." *Viewpoint Magazine*. 17 May 2017. Web. 30 Oct. 2017. <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/05/17/the-birthmark-of-damnation-ta-nehisi-coates-and-the-black-body/>.
- Tax, Meredith. *Double Bind: The Muslim Right, the Anglo-American Left, and Universal Human Rights*. New York: Centre for Secular Space, 2012. Print.

- Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1.1 (2012): 1-40. Print.
- Wilderson, Frank B. *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press: 2008. Print.
- Wolfe, Ross. "Decolonial Dead End." *The Charnel House*. 5 Feb. 2015. Web. 30 Oct. 2017. <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2015/02/05/decolonial-dead-end-hou-ria-bouteldja-and-the-new-indigenism-beyond-left-and-right/>.
- . "Dialectics and Difference: Against the "Decolonial Turn." *Insurgent Notes* 15 (2017). Web. Aug. 2018. <http://insurgentnotes.com/2017/08/dialectics-and-difference-against-the-decolonial-turn/>.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "A Leftist Plea for 'Eurocentrism.'" *Critical Inquiry* 24.4 (1998): 988-1009. Print.